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OSCAR WILDE
FRAGMENTS & MEMORIES

BY

MARTIN BIRNBAUM

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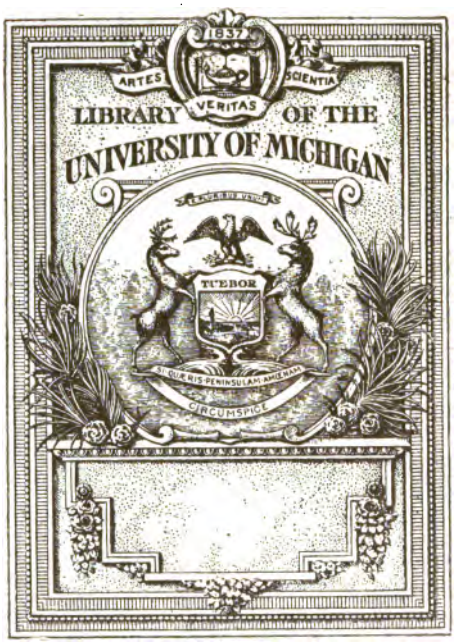

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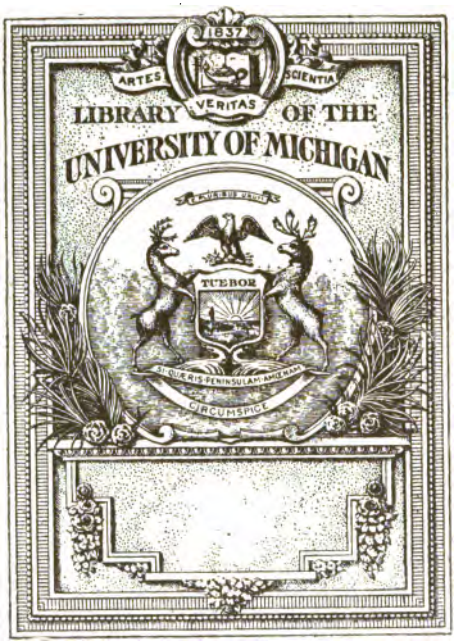

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OSCAR WILDE

FRAGMENTS AND MEMORIES

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OSCAR WILDE

From an etching from life by James Edward Kelly

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OSCAR WILDE

FRAGMENTS AND MEMORIES

BY

MARTIN BIRNBAUM

LONDON

ELKIN MATHEWS, CORK STREET

1920

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OSCAR WILDE

FRAGMENTS AND MEMORIES

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OSCAR WILDE

FRAGMENTS AND MEMORIES

EARLY in the nineties Clyde Fitch, an ambitious young American, had a play produced in London. After the final curtain some rowdies in the pit coaxed the inexperienced playwright to appear before the footlights and proceeded to "boo" and hiss him off as soon as he stepped in view. But the young man was not crushed. "They will have to applaud me yet," he exclaimed, and his subsequent meteoric career proved that he had fine talents. At that time, however, there were few in London who would listen to his verses, stories, and plays, and fewer still to

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buy them. In a notebook of the period we find him paraphrasing an ancient pessimistic troubadour,—

> My fate is like the nightingale's,
> That singeth all night long,
> While still the woodlands mournfully
> But echo back his song.

Sympathetic criticism and encouragement meant a great deal to him, and these were given him by Oscar Wilde. Like all generous spirits, the latter liked to praise, and when they met socially at the houses of London's smart set the kindly interest of the celebrity was highly appreciated by the aspiring playwright. Their acquaintance had long since ripened into a fine friendship. Wilde's exquisite fairy tales had evidently inspired young Fitch, and one of the stories in the latter's first published book—which breathes a spirit as pure and delightful as Wilde's own work—contains a charming dedication to the author of "The Happy Prince." It was to these stories that Wilde probably re-

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ferred in the following note, which was found among his friend's papers:

[16 Tite Street,
Chelsea, N.W.]

Dear Clyde, Just a line to tell you how sorry I am that you have left town, and how much I shall miss you.

When you return we must make merry over a flagon of purple wine, and invent new tales with which to charm the world. O. W.

One gloomy, rainy afternoon, the two men met in a deserted street. Wilde was driving in a hansom and he invited his friend to take the vacant seat beside him. Fitch accepted, and at once began to remonstrate with Wilde regarding certain ugly rumours which were circulating in London about him. The poet attempted to turn the matter into an epigram, but his friend would not be put off. He wanted a plain answer to the charges. Wilde refused to discuss the topic and finally called to the driver: "Stop to let this man out! I invited him for a drive, but he is not a gentleman!"

The incident reads like a page from

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"Dorian Gray." The old relationship ended then and there, but Fitch always admitted his obligation as an artist to Wilde, continued to look upon him as his intellectual inspiration, and was among those who came to Wilde's aid after his release from prison. Before the rupture a voluminous correspondence existed between them, and Fitch's library contained presentation copies of most of Wilde's works. "To Clyde, to whom the world has given both laurels and love, from his friend who wrote this book, May, '91" is the typical inscription in one of them. Between the leaves of another volume there is one of Wilde's many beautiful, useless telegrams which reads simply: "What a charming day it has been!" Unfortunately, almost all the letters which passed between them seem to have been destroyed. A few happy notes from Wilde's wife to Fitch's mother still remain, in one of which she writes that Oscar "has become mad about golf, and spends two or three hours on the

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links every day, and this is so good for him." Cyril and Vivian, the children, have been having birthdays and whooping cough. Details of her domestic happiness are given which are painfully touching in the light of the trials that were in store for her a few short years after these letters were written.

The most precious souvenir of the friendship between the two men is the manuscript of the following poem, found in a presentation copy of "Intentions." It has no title, and is signed "Oscar."

Out of the mid-wood's twilight,
  Into the meadow's dawn,
Ivory-limbed and brown-eyed
  Flashes my faun.

He skips through the copses singing,
  And his shadow dances along,
And I know not which I should follow,
  Shadow or song.

O Hunter snare me his shadow,
  O nightingale catch me his strain,
For, moonstruck by madness and music
  I seek him in vain.

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The poem was published under the title "In the Forest," in 1889, in the Christmas number of "The Lady's Pictorial Magazine," and the last two lines were there changed to read:

> Else, moonstruck with music and madness,
> I track him in vain!

The calligraphy is large, clear, and youthful, quite unlike the almost illegible, flowing scrawl of his last letters, some of which we shall quote, or the neat, tiny hand of his middle period, when the following transcript of a dialogue with Coquelin was written. The conversation took place when Wilde was living in Paris at the Hôtel Voltaire, on the *quai* of that name overlooking the Louvre and the river Seine. The first draft of "The Sphinx" was also written there. Oscar's radiant personality was in those days a feature of the French literary salons. Sherard, in his book "The Story of an Unhappy Friendship," mentions the meeting between Coquelin and Wilde at a luncheon,

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and adds that the actor was not greatly impressed by the poet. The dialogue is followed by some French "phrases and philosophies" and scraps of criticism, all taken from a large commonplace-book, bought at the sale of Wilde's effects, and printed here exactly as they were left.

COQUELIN: Qu'est-ce-que c'est la civilization, Monsieur Wilde?

EGO: L'amour du beau.

COQUELIN: Qu'est-ce-que c'est le beau?

EGO: Ce que les bourgeois appelent le laid.

COQUELIN: Et ce que les bourgeois appelent le beau?

EGO: Cela n'existe pas.

Mon drame? Du style seulement. Hugo et Shakespeare ont partage tous les sujets: il est impossible d'être original, même dans le péché: ainsi il n'y a pas d'emotions, seulement des adjectifs extraordinaires. Le fin est assez tragique, mon heros au moment de son triomphe fait un epigramme que manque tout-a-fait d'effet, alors on le condamne a être academicien avec discours forcés.

(Ego to Coquelin.)

La poesie c'est la grammaire idealisee. (O. W.)

L'art, c'est le desordre.

(Garcon at the Voltaire.)

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Les maîtres anciens, c'est la momie, n'est ce pas?
(Concierge at the Louvre.)

Artiste en poésie, et poëte; deux choses très differents: c. q. Gautier et Hugo. (O. W.)

Baudelaire: un peu lourd:

Zola: voit simple, et voit clair; peut faire des masses.

Pour ecrire il me faut de satin jaune.
(O. W.)

Il me faut des lions dans des cages dorées: c'est affreux, après la chair humaine les lions aiment l'or, et on ne le leur donne jamais. (O. W.)

Un ami d'Ephrussi avait un tortue doree avec des emerauds sur le dos: il me faut aussi des emerauds: des bibelots vivants.

The only schools worth founding are schools without disciples. (O. W.)

Il y a quelque chose plus terrible encore que le bourgeois—c'est l'homme qui nous singe.
(Degas to Walter.)

J'aime assez les applaudissements, mais enfin j'ai trouve que le public ne peut pas decouvrir les fautes: dans les arts monsieur, on peut toujours dissimuler; moi-meme j'ai fait des fautes: mais je les ai toujours caché. . . . Quand je vois dans un nouveau pays j'observe les coiffures; je sais bien qu'il y a des gens qui s'occupent avec les batiments publics mais je me

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fiche de tout ca: pour moi rien n'existe que les coiffures . . . mais pour être coiffeur il faut être physionomiste aussi.

(My hair-dresser's conversation, Rue Scribe.)

Interruptions have not merely their artistic value in giving the impression that the dialogue is created by the actors and not by the author, but they have their physical value also, they give to the actor time to breathe, and fill his lungs again.

Nothing is worth painting except what is not worth looking at.

The Greeks discovered that "le beau etait beau": we, that "le laid est beau aussi."

Ready-made beauty—for the bourgeois.

Then follows what is apparently the table-talk of the poet Maurice Rollinat, who tried to rival Baudelaire on his own ground, and was going to pieces mentally and physically when Wilde and Sherard knew him. "It was drugs," writes Sherard—"drugs with him morning and night, drugs for food and drugs for sleep; cerebral excitement all the time. The result as we saw it was a terrible one, and we could fancy the nerve-wreck of Charles Baudelaire, before the bow snapped,

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from the ravaged picture before us." Rollinat checked himself in time, however, and wrote some interesting decadent poetry, notably "Les Névroses." Wilde invited him to a good dinner at the Voltaire, and our quotation may be Wilde's transcription of the French poet's own words, or ideas suggested to Wilde by what Rollinat said, or by the verses which he recited on that occasion. The page in Wilde's notebook is headed "Rollinat."

Il n'y-a q'une forme pour le beau mais pour chaque chose chaque individu a un formule: ainsi on ne comprend pas les poëts:

Je ne crois pas au progres: mais je crois au stagnation de la perversite humaine.

Il me faut les reves, le fantastique; j'admire les chaises Japonais parce-que ils n'ont pas etait faits pour s'asseoir.

—his idea of music continuing the beauty of the poetry without its idea.*

* Errors in accents, spelling, and grammar have been printed as they appear in the original manuscript.

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The book from which these fragments were taken contained much more, but the dealer into whose hands it fell was in the habit of tearing out the sheets and inserting them into copies of first editions of Wilde's books, to enhance their value for the many bibliophiles who collect his works. The propriety of publishing such scraps, left behind without an author's final revisions, is open to question, but the French fragments quoted above seem exceptional, for the slight errors and peculiarities of style throw some light on the alleged debt which Wilde owed to Marcel Schwob, through whose hands the manuscript of "Salome" passed before it was printed. At some future time we hope to be able to find a short German poem which Wilde wrote, after his imprisonment, on the fly-leaf of Peter Hille's "Petrarca," while he was reading it on the shores of Lake Garda, in the company of Hans Heinz Ewers. The latter has written a rather lurid account of Wilde's sojourn

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in Capri, where Ewers is remembered on account of his exploration of the caves on the island.

In publishing letters no such apology is necessary. The more spontaneous they are, the greater their value as personal documents. As examples of epistolary style many of Wilde's letters are not particularly good, but had his correspondence with Clyde Fitch been preserved, it would have formed an interesting commentary on the works, for Wilde was fond of discussing literary experiments with his friend.

A large number of Wilde's letters have already been sold in the auction rooms. If collected, these would be invaluable for some future biographer who will disassociate the man from the strange confusion of ideas which already attaches to his name, who will not fall into the error of sentimentalizing, and will write a literary, not a pathological, history. Richard Butler Glaenzer, in his book entitled "Decorative Art in America,"

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has published the letters to Miss Marie Prescott relating to the performance of Wilde's first play, "Vera," in New York, August 20, 1883; also a fine letter to Joaquin Miller, thanking him for the sympathy he extended to Wilde when the latter was insulted on his American lecture tour. Many more, which it is to be hoped Glaenzer will bring together in a single volume, are still in his possession. The most important of these are the letters, some of them facetious, to Leonard Smithers, relating to the publication of the "Ballad of Reading Goal"; a few charming social notes to the publisher's wife; a clever letter to Thomas Hutchinson, the book collector; and many relating to his American tour. Several of his letters to Richard Le Gallienne were recently put up for sale. Like the famous "prose sonnet," which was read with terrible effect at the trial, and the letter reproduced in facsimile in Sherard's book, they are filled with those extravagant but quite innocent expressions

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which characterize most of Wilde's letters to friends. The finest collection hitherto sold, belonged to John B. Stetson, Jnr., of Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. It included groups of letters to Frank Harris, J. M. Stoddart, Lord Alfred Douglas, Mrs. Leverson, known as "The Sphinx," and other friends. This collection was said to have been formed with the avowed intention of writing a "Life," but the pressure of other interests of the owner made this impossible.

Colonel Morse, Wilde's manager, whose faith in the poet's character is to this day unfaltering, could add many facts to such a biography. His account of Wilde's delivery, in Boston, of the lecture on the English Renaissance of Art is particularly vivid and amusing. When the Colonel looked through the stage door and saw fifty or sixty Harvard students file into front rows with a Bunthorne gait, wearing knee breeches and long silk stockings, blond wigs of flowing hair, bright satin cravats, coats, and even shoes,

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decorated with lilies or sunflowers, he at once insisted that Wilde should change his aesthetic costume for a more conventional one. After some persuasion he complied with his manager's request. The plucky Irishman, as Colonel Morse still calls him, then walked without any hesitation down the long stage, amid noisy cheers and howls, and at once turned the tables on the young burlesquers. "As a college man, I greet you!" he began, thus taking the wind out of their sails. Then he started his lecture by flattering the great audience, but feeling that the students required more attention, he again interrupted the thread of his argument, ran his eye over them, and remarked ironically that he considered it an honour to lecture in Boston, because he seemed to see certain signs of an artistic movement in the lecture hall. This was greeted by a prolonged roar of laughter, which was renewed when Wilde added that on seeing the young men he was compelled to breathe for the

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first time a silent prayer to be delivered from his disciples.

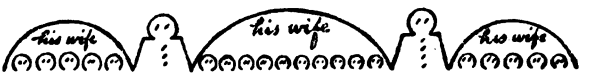
Wilde's own description of other lectures, and experiences, was sent in the following undated letter to his ever faithful friend Mrs. Bernard-Beere, who took the part of Mrs. Arbuthnot in the presentation of "A Woman of No Importance," at the Haymarket Theatre, London, April 19, 1893.

Your letter was charming—
write to New York 1207 Broadway.

Kansas City,
Missouri

My dear Bernie:

I have lectured to the Mormons—the Opera House at Salt Lake is an enormous affair about the size of Covent Garden, and holds with ease 14 families. They sit like this



and very, very ugly. The President, a nice old man, sat with 5 wives in the stage box. I visited

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him in the afternoon and saw a charming daughter of his.

I have also lectured at Leadville, the great mining city in the Rocky Mountains. We took a whole day to get up to it on a narrow gauge railway 14,000 feet in height. My audience was entirely miners; their make-up excellent; red shirts and blond beards, the whole of the first three rows being filled with McKee Rankins of every colour and dimension. I spoke to them of the early Florentines, and they slept as though no crime had ever stained the ravines of their mountain home. I described to them the picture of Botticelli and the name, which seemed to them like a new drink, roused them from their dreams, but when I told them in my boyish eloquence of the "secret of Botticelli" the strong men wept like children. Their sympathy touched me and I approached modern art and had almost won them over to a real reverence for what is beautiful when unluckily I described one of Jimmy Whistler's "nocturnes in blue and gold." Then they leaped to their feet and in their grand simple way swore that such things should not be. Some of the younger ones pulled their revolvers out and left hurriedly to see if Jimmy was "prowling about the saloons" or "wrastling a hash" at any eating shop. Had he been there I fear he would have been killed, their feeling was so bitter. Their enthusiasm satisfied me and I ended my lecture there. Then I found the Governor of the State waiting in a

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bullock *waggon* to bring me down the great silver mine of the world, the "Matchless." So off we drove, the miners carrying torches before us till we came to the shaft and were shot down in buckets (I of course true to my principle being graceful even in a bucket) and down in the great gallery of the mine, the walls and ceilings glittering with metal ore, was spread a banquet for us.

The amazement of the miners when they saw that art and appetite could go hand in hand knew no bounds; when I lit a long cigar they cheered till the silver fell in dust from the roof on our plates; and when I quaffed a cocktail without flinching, they unanimously pronounced me in their grand simple way "a bully boy with no glass eye,"—artless and spontaneous praise which touched me more than the pompous panegyrics of literary critics ever did or could. Then I had to open a new vein, or lode, which with a silver drill I brilliantly performed, amidst unanimous applause. The silver drill was presented to me and the lode named "The Oscar." I had hoped that in their simple, grand way they would have offered me shares in "The Oscar," but in their artless untutored fashion they did not. Only the silver drill remains as a memory of my night at Leadville.

I have had a delightful time all through California and Colorado and am now returning home—twice as affected as ever, my dear Bernie. Please remember me to dear Dot, to Regie and all our mutual friends

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including Monty Morris, who won't write to me or ever criticise me.

Good bye, Your sincere friend
OSCAR WILDE

J. M. Stoddart, the publisher of "Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf," can also give many interesting facts concerning Wilde's sojourn in America. Few people know that the curious paper on which that book is printed was originally intended for early paper currency, and was found in an old Philadelphia warehouse, where it had been stored since the Revolution. Some of the emblems scattered through the book were engraved on wood from sketches by the distinguished pioneer in American art, James Edward Kelly. The most interesting picture is the one, on the title-page, of the seal of a ring given to Wilde by his mother. Kelly saw a great deal of the poet, especially when the latter sat for the small bronze relief portrait which, when finished, won Wilde's enthusiastic approval. "A bas-relief," he told the

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sculptor, "should be carved like a jewel. It must be full. There must be no waste spaces." Kelly's plaque and his etching (only the head of which was used as the frontispiece for the American edition of "De Profundis"), Albert Sterner's portrait for "La Plume," Toulouse-Lautrec's extraordinary sketch of Wilde on trial, Harper Pennington's oil portrait, and W. P. Frith's sketch are, curiously enough, almost the only known authentic portraits of Wilde made by any of his numerous artist friends.* His point of view and criticisms were highly valued by Kelly, who was in the habit of transcribing in Boswellian fashion all the remarks of his brilliant sitter. He dwells with mournful interest on the visits to Wilde's attractive temporary New York home on Irving Place, next to the building

* Hermann Struck's charming etching, as well as most of the frontispieces to books about Wilde, were not made from life. A good drawing by an unknown artist was in the possession of Robert Ross. Beardsley and less important graphic artists often made caricatures of him.

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The southwest corner of Irving Place and Seventeenth Street, New York City.
The corner house was at one time the house of Washington Irving.
Wilde resided in the building adjoining on the left.

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once occupied by Washington Irving; his delightful walks up Fifth Avenue on "sunny Oscar Wilde mornings"; the social call on Lily Langtry and the heated dispute with her about the most becoming arrangement of Oscar's wavy locks; the meeting at Wilde's request with Thomas Edison, whom the poet considered the greatest man in America; the sparkling conversations between Wilde and John Boyle O'Reilly, at that time a handsome figure in Boston's literary circles; Oscar's clever posing when interviewed by American reporters; his witticisms and his inspired audacity; his superstitious dread of some catastrophe when his mother's ring, already mentioned, was found broken; his genuine grief over the failure of "Vera," jeered at quite justly by the critics as soon as the violent heroine appeared in a flaming vermilion gown, for which the playwright himself had purchased the material; above all, his glowing eulogy of the lamented genius John Donoghue, whose beautiful figure of

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the young Sophocles leading the chorus of youths at Salamis is one of America's masterpieces. Wilde not only bought some of the sculptor's work, but in the course of a lecture in Chicago he went out of his way to praise the then unknown artist and made him famous. Poor Donoghue! Less than three years after his patron and discoverer had been laid to rest in the cemetery at Bagneux, he went away to a lonely corner to commit suicide, and there was only one steadfast friend to see him to his humble resting-place.

Robert Blum, the gifted painter whose fine works adorned the walls of Mendelssohn Hall in New York, was another artist whom Wilde admired. He would often walk into Blum's extraordinary studio, decorated with frescoes of strutting peacocks, and amuse the sitters with his vein of gentle humour, his attitudes, and his curious clothes. To one woman posing for Blum he suggested that she should wear his favourite colours,—*café*

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au lait and sage green, with a yellow tea rose. To another he remarked that Blum's delicious tints gave him a sensation similar to eating a yellow satin dress. His repartee was brilliant and amusing, but not infrequently he was compelled to retreat. On one occasion an American lady described something to him as "awfully nice." Oscar looked bored and exclaimed, "But 'nice' is such a nasty word!" Quick as a flash she replied, "Really, Mr. Wilde? But is 'nasty' such a nice word?"

In a more or less intimate way, Wilde also enjoyed the society and hospitality of Julia Ward Howe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Louisa Alcott, Kate Field, General Grant, Henry Ward Beecher, William Chase, and many other American celebrities. The lecture tour brought him into touch with many noble natures and aroused his finest ambitions. America put him on his mettle by treating him like a great personality. He ceased to

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become a mere dilettante and experimenter. The long locks of hair and posturings which went with them were all discarded. It was, however, long after his return to England that he did his best work—"The Soul of Man under Socialism," of which he was pardonably proud; the delicate fairy tales, "Intentions," and the plays, scintillating with the wittiest epigrammatic dialogue written since the days of Aristophanes.

It was this enviable measure of success in life and in every form of literary endeavour that made the scandal of his downfall so shocking and deplorable. He was brought to a full stop at the very height of his splendid career, and was suddenly driven back into the depths where he had once gone for sensations, after tiring, as he said, of being on the heights. His imagination was struck by lightning. Dublin's Greek medallist and the winner of the Newdigate was called upon to suffer an agony acute beyond ordinary human endurance. When he faced the world

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again the flowers in his fancy's wreath were scattered, and he finally returned to Paris to seek among its social outcasts a merciful oblivion, near the salons where he once revelled in the joy of life. The shy Ernest Dowson, who was then translating French classics and writing verses while on the verge of starvation, saw him occasionally in the cafés of the quarter. The lord of language, the embodiment of eternal youth and laughter, had become a bankrupt and a byword, a terrible warning to men who dared defy society. The one pleasant incident in the record of this part of his career is his meeting with Fritz Thaulow at Dieppe. Wilde had been insulted by some English residents of the town in the presence of the big Northerner, when the painter walked up to the poet, and said in a clear voice which all the prudes could hear, "Mr. Wilde, my wife and I would feel honoured to have you dine with us *en famille* this evening." There he found Charles Conder, the decorator of ex-

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quisite fans, and both men recovered something of their former gaiety in the charming atmosphere of the Thaulow home, filled with golden-haired children and their infectious laughter. Christian Krogh, the Norwegian painter, a relative of Thaulow's by marriage, has preserved some of the poet's conversation and made a pen-and-ink sketch of him, in a book entitled, "Smaa Dagsreiser" (Christiania, 1897). Unfortunately, Wilde did not remain at Dieppe. His Irish spirit was gone, and soon we hear of him living under an assumed name in the Parisian mire, among soiled lives. Shunning the sunny places, he wandered about the mean streets where that curious problem of French literature, the mad De Nerval, had written masterpieces, where Rimbaud and Verlaine had lived so feverishly, where Josiah Flynt, the born vagabond, had chosen to roam because the squalid section of Paris was to him the most interestingly human. Leonard Smithers, who had helped Beardsley and who was

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advancing money to Dowson, now came to Wilde's aid also, and the pathos of the following letters to his publisher and friend requires no comment.

June 23, 1898.

My dear Smithers—Please send me £10.—and you will receive the MS. with its due corrections—I don't think you can receive it if you don't, as I am quite penniless, and on the brink of expulsion from my hotel—I do not receive anything till July 1st—I hope you will make up your mind about this coming to Paris, as Robbie has a suit of clothes for me and if you don't come I shall have to wait till I can pay the duty. I have gone to a little inn at Nogent—

Address—
M. Sebastian Melmoth
L'Idée
Le Perreux
Nogent-sur-Marne

as I dare not go back to my Hotel and at Nogent I have credit.—

Do please do this for me *at once.*

Yours O. W.

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PARIS
Aug. 12, 1898.
Friday.

MY DEAR SMITHERS, Thank you very much for the cheque, which was a great boon, to the patron of the Hotel primarily, and in a secondary degree to myself. I am much obliged to you.

I hope to receive my proofs soon. It is so hot in Paris that I simply cannot write a letter—at night it is charming but by day a tiger's mouth. If I could get away to the sea, all would be well. I saw Carrington the other night—he tells me of a wonderful book of poems you have published and has promised to let me see it. Carrington looked *triste* and hysterical—what a curious type he is—!

The English are very unpopular in Paris now—as all those who are over here under Cook's direction are thoroughly respectable. There is much indignation on the boulevards. I try to convince them that they are our worst specimens—but it is a difficult task.

Yr. O. W.

Even when he was an outcast the wit of the once blithe-spirited aesthete could not be suppressed, and it was peculiarly fitting that he should die jesting. Publishers and theatrical managers had been trying to kindle

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